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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTIONS: TWO DAYS OUT, KARZAI GAINS
MOMENTUM AMID AN UPTICK IN VIOLENCE

REF: A. KABUL 2405
[1](#)B. KABUL 2366
[1](#)C. KABUL 2334
[1](#)D. KABUL 2295

Classified By: PolCouns APforzheimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: By nearly all observations, President Karzai has gained momentum in the last week with the endorsements of influential former warlords like General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ismael Khan (ref A, B), as well as five minor presidential candidates on August 17. Further, polling data prior to these events suggests that Karzai holds as much as a 16-point lead over his closest competitor. A second round remains a possibility, but less so than two weeks ago. Many Afghans say they want to vote for the winning candidate, so Karzai's perceived momentum could produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. Election officials are optimistic that over 6,500 polling centers will open--1690 more than the last presidential elections. Allegations of fraud, especially from the Abdullah campaign, may foreshadow protests if he loses. Security on election day remains a key concern, as scattered explosions rock heavily protected Kabul, and provincial polling stations and materials were attacked. End Summary.

Karzai Gains Momentum, but Enough?

[1](#)2. (C) President Karzai has gained momentum in the final two weeks before the election. Polling data puts Karzai ahead solidly, with a 16-point lead over Abdullah (Karzai 42%, Abdullah 26%, Bashardost 9%, Ghani 5%, all other candidates 18%). This data does not reflect the final two-week Karzai push, nor the recent endorsements of influential regional leaders General Abdul Rashid Dostum in the North, and Ismael Khan in Herat. On August 18, five minor presidential candidates also endorsed him, including one of the self-proclaimed leaders of the group of 22 presidential candidates, former Vice President Hedayat Arsala (ref C). Although 10 candidates have pulled out publicly, only one has reported this officially to the IEC. The ballots were printed with all 41 names, and with 40 still officially in the running, it will be difficult for any candidate to pass the 50% required to win in the first round.

[1](#)3. (C) Nonetheless, overwhelmingly Afghans tell us they want to vote for the winning candidate, which may make Karzai's final push and perceived momentum become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many Afghans tell us that communities will vote for the perceived "winner" so they can tell the future president that they were supporters, and obtain assistance funds and other benefits from the next Administration. They may also be motivated, out of fear, to want the process over

quickly and not see a second round.

Presidential Debate Boosts Populist Dark Horse

¶4. (C) The August 16 televised presidential debate featuring Karzai, Ghani and Bashardost drew positive press for its historic significance, in particular due to the participation of an incumbent president. Overall, the debates helped both Bashardost and Karzai, but likely boosted Bashardost the most, since he surpassed lower expectations (many thought he would say something irrational) and used persuasive populist arguments against corruption and warlord politics. Karzai was careful but polished, although some interlocutors assert that as the current president, expectations were higher for him, so he did not fare as well. Ghani was stoic and suave, but his technocratic terminology and theoretical 20-year plans for Afghanistan paled compared to down-to-earth Bashardost.

Elections Preparations

¶5. (U) The Ministry of the Interior (MOI), Ministry of Defense (MOD) and IEC announced that over 6,500 polling centers will open for the August 20 elections--1690 more than the last presidential elections on August 15. The IEC said they will only send IEC officials and materials to those centers that have Afghan National Security Forces present. The MOD and MOI will still try to open another 443 centers, possibly adding polling centers up to the polling day,

depending on security conditions.

¶6. (U) The IEC operations department said the following provinces lack female staff as both searchers and polling center personnel: Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Logar, Paktia, Paktika, Uruzgun and Zabul. The most conservative Southern Pashtun Provinces remain the most difficult to staff, although both the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, as well as the Afghan Women's Network (a counterpart of International Republican Institute) have actively helped recruit volunteers. UNIFEM printed and distributed 34,000 posters urging Afghan women to participate in the election and by becoming female IEC officials and searchers. When females are not available, tribal elders perform the task.

Fraud and Repercussions

¶7. (U) The ECC told us that as of August 17, they have received a total of 440 electoral fraud complaints, 107 of which were against presidential candidates. Of the total cases, 172 have reached adjudication, with 22 cases imposing fines. The overwhelming majority of the complaints are from the north, in particular Takhar, Balkh, Kunduz and Badakhshan. Both top presidential candidates have been fined by the ECC for electoral violations, to include Karzai's VP for the misuse of government resources for campaign purposes, while Abdullah's campaign was fined for pasting billboards on the Ministry of Public Health in Khost Province, and for illegally dropping pamphlets over Kabul. Senior Abdullah Advisor Dr. Farid Zikria told us these fines made a mockery out of the ECC, as only one day after Karzai's VP was fined, he appeared at rallies with "half his cabinet." He also noted the whole IEC voting staff in Shirwak district in Kandahar was populated by Popalzai, Karzai's tribe.

¶8. (SBU) The custody of sensitive balloting materials remains a concern in the most dangerous districts. On August 18, the ANA delivered balloting materials to an Eastern province, and handed it over to a community policing group. No ANA, ANP, or IEC personnel were in sight, according to an ISAF representative present. The use of these community

policing groups, in particular if highly publicized, may affect the perception of fair elections. The Abdullah campaign told us they were concerned about these highly "secretive" groups.

¶9. (C) Reports, in particular from the North, suggest that Abdullah's supporters may give teeth to the statement made by Balkh Governor Mohammad Atta Noor, Professor Rabbani, and House Speaker Yunus Qanooni that "if the election results are not perceived to be fair and transparent," there may be violence (ref D). While some Abdullah supporters have said ethnic violence is a possible outcome, in particular if "someone" makes specific cases of elections fraud public following the elections, others tell us the Abdullah campaign is using the "there will be violence" card to: 1) prevent Karzai from using widespread fraud, 2) get the attention of the international community, and 3) gain leverage for post-election negotiations. Many are concerned, however, that this strategy could spiral out of control.

Security Remains a Key Concern

¶10. (S) On August 18, the Taliban claimed responsibility for the suicide bomber who killed five at a checkpoint in Southern Uruzgan province. On the same day, a Taliban militant gunned down a candidate for provincial council in Northern province Jowzjan, and in Jalalabad province election materials were burned when the Taliban attacked the group transporting the materials on pack animals. A polling site in Paktia was burned down by insurgents as well. A rocket attack on the Presidential Palace compound early August 18 injured one. A large car bomb exploded on Jalalabad Road in Kabul on August 18 near U.S. base Camp Pheonix and the IEC headquarters. Initial reports claim up to six British soldiers were killed, while preliminary intelligence reports say one U.S. soldier and two UNAMA staff were killed, with over 50 injured.
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